

# American Writers in Search of a Book Fair

By RUMA DASGUPTA



INDRANI PAL

It could have been the winter of our discontent in West Bengal. On our wanted list was the 33rd Kolkata Book Fair, with the United States as the focus country. However, the Calcutta High Court ruled that this year's chosen site, the greens of Park Circus, were too close to numerous educational institutions and, above all, to a hospital. On the eve of the inaugural day, the fair stood cancelled. Civic rights activists who moved court had every reason to do so. A book fair that is the third largest in the world would

have thrown traffic out of gear and added to the existing noise pollution. The lawns of Park Circus were already damaged by the stalls and the playground was out of bounds for children. Still, the sudden depression in the Bay of Bengal was just as unexpected as winter in this part of the country without the traditional book fair celebrating the literary heritage of Bengal and the world.

The American Center in Kolkata decided to console book lovers with what American writer Paul Theroux called "a guerrilla book fair." It wasn't underground, however. It was wide open to the public, with book readings, lectures, seminars, a spelling bee and an inter-collegiate debate on the question: "Does American Culture Have a Positive Influence on Indian Youth?" There was even a sale on books, in a way. The American Library offered a 50 percent discount on annual membership.

The Government of West Bengal and publishing houses also organized a revived version of the Book Fair from March 1 to 10. Events planned at the American pavilion included a launch of *The Fiction of Alice Walker* by Seema Murugan; sessions on visa information and Fulbright fellowship counseling; book and play readings; American music by the Calcutta School of Music quartet; American folk and country songs by Pulak Das; and a presentation on U.S. presidential elections by the American Center.

In 1816, Mark Twain was asked in Calcutta if he had ever met a Bengali.

"Not yet in flesh," he replied, "But in literature, can I ever forget him?"

The bonding with books in Bengal goes back a long way. It's this emotional connect that carried Kolkata through January 30 to February 7. Even without the book fair, we interacted with Theroux,

American playwright Brian Russo and Bengali dramatist Malavika Bhattacharya read a play, *The Guys*, by Anne Nelson at the Starmark bookstore in Kolkata.

poets Joy Harjo and Christopher Merrill and others in intimate environs to explore what lies between the lines in contemporary American writing. It was a huge disappointment for publishers and marketers, with thousands of books from around the world on their way to India and 10,000 copies of *The Mingling of Waters*—an anthology of the works of poets of Bengal and the United States—landing up in a non-existent book fair. But for those who made it to the Lincoln Room at the American Center, to Bangla Academy, Yapan Chitra Gallery, Presidency College, Town Hall or to Oxford Bookstore, it was a rewarding experience.

On the opening day at the substitute fair, Theroux, Harjo and Merrill captivated the audience at the American Center when they spoke on "Re-mapping Cultural Narratives in American Literature."

Douglas Kelly, director of the American Center, has admired all that Theroux has written for over 40 years and it was because of his initiative that the writer was once again in Kolkata. Theroux's first visit to the subcontinent was in the mid-1970s, much of which is chronicled in the book that shot him to fame—*The Great Railway Bazaar*. Theroux believes that a return journey to any place should be made by retracing steps as far as possible through surface travel, revisiting places and seeing the seen in a new light.

"For instance," Theroux elaborated, "I went to the Kali temple in this city... in Kalighat... yesterday

and then again today. It was different today from what it was yesterday. The crowd was different, the light was different and even my mood was different." It was also his way of negotiating a question from the press that caught him unawares and challenged him to explain his first impression of Kolkata recorded in *The Great Railway Bazaar*, which was a series of negative perceptions by an outsider.

Just listening to his tales of travel across continents was a wonderful reassurance that the world has not fully shrunk into a global village in our postmodern age of package tours and virtual globetrotting.

"Have you seen any of those ice houses that used to be here?" he said, referring to the British storehouses for ice brought from a lake in Canada to chill the wines and cool the air in this capital of the British Empire in India.

Neither temples nor forts nor museums engage Theroux as much as the human architecture of a place. It's that interest in human beings in relation to their culture and their environment, their past

and their present, their body language and their idiosyncrasies that perhaps took him a second time to Kalighat temple, teeming with devotees, hawkers and shoppers, with a crematorium next to it and with one of the city's red light areas encircling it, pimps and priests and householders sharing space with the dusky goddess Kali.

Inspired and encouraged by Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, with whom he shared a deep friendship for many decades, Theroux has written more than 50 travel articles, numerous essays, short stories and engaging novels that have captured the formative cultural changes of our times.

"I will never write the great American novel," he says. "What I'd write would reflect where I'd been and what I'd seen, what I know."

If Theroux believes in writing about the world as he sees it, Harjo writes narrative poetry from the wealth of shared tribal memory of her people. The past gets entwined with the present as she travels in time as opposed to Theroux's grounded journeys.

Harjo's shiny black hair frames her face, etched with lines that tell as many stories as her narrative poems. She delves into the myths and lore of her Muskoke tribe, fighting to preserve its identity.

"I come from one of the 500 tribes and cultures in the United States who are omitted on the official map," Harjo told us, and for a fleeting second her eyes were on fire.

Harjo was born in May 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and hails from a family of painters. At the University of New Mexico, she switched her major from art to poetry, which probably explains her fusion of art and poetry, and music and poetry. During her presentations, she sings her lyrics and punctuates them with the strains of a saxophone.

"In my tribe, we don't separate poetry from sto-

*American writers (from right) Paul Theroux, Joy Harjo and Christopher Merrill interact with the audience after a book reading hosted by American Center Director Douglas Kelly (far left).*

rytelling, music or dance. Most poetry is outside the covers of books. In our families, there is one who is designated to collect stories and songs. We listen to stories when we are pregnant. The stories go into our babies and are stored as memories," Harjo told the audience before she read from *In Mad Love and War* and *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*.

In India, reeling under jet lag and getting used to the chaos, Harjo took time opening up. Once she found her bearings she was eager to meet an astrologer and a palmist, not as a typical tourist from the West, but from a deeper interest in the grassroots of Indian society and its practices that create its indigenous identity. Before she left for Santiniketan, she had already established bonds with those of us who knew the moment we saw her that she was like one of our own.

Quiet and understated, Merrill was a treasure trove Kolkata discovered. Author of *The Grass of Another Country: A Journey Through the World of Soccer*, *The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War* and *the Age of the Refugee*, Merrill urged us to critique the wisdom of those who control the world from positions of power.

Merrill has been a reporter who recorded his experiences in war zones, especially in Yugoslavia. He talked of his concern to get the story right without taking sides, revealing a mind that is constantly in search of the truth. In his most recent non-fiction work, *Things of the Hidden God*, he came to terms with various kinds of love, from the spiritual to the vocational. The book is an account of his journey to Mount Athos in Greece, which has 20 monasteries and 2,000 monks.

A journalist, literary critic and teacher, he has published four collections of poetry as well. He is also the director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

"The experience of reading and writing poetry is not unlike the experience of prayer," Merrill says. Many of his poems are a search for the divine.

Merrill is a layered personality who listens to medieval chants and folk music. He loves the works of unknown icon painters in the churches of Mount Athos, as well as Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall. At the American Center, he recited his poem on a soccer player juggling a ball on the last day of summer on an empty field, which sounded like rap and captured the rhythm of a game that Kolkatans thrive on.

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## New Delhi Book Fair



RAJA BHATTACHARYA

More than 30,000 visitors to the American Center booth at the World Book Fair in New Delhi, held February 2 to 10, got a glimpse of the United States through the variety of American Library products and issues of SPAN magazine. They were also given information about reprint titles from the Indo-American Cooperative Publishing Program. A PowerPoint presentation on "Glimpses of the United States" touched on American life and culture and U.S. elections. Visitors also participated in daily quizzes and were offered special deals for American Library membership and SPAN subscriptions.



PANKAJ DATTA